

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS ZAGREB 000179

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM PGOV HR

SUBJECT: FASCISM FALLS OUT OF FASHION IN CROATIA

Sensitive but Unclassified -- Please Treat Accordingly

Summary

1. (SBU) Until relatively recently, expressions of extreme nationalism were considered acceptable in Croatia's political and social dialogue. That seems to be changing. Croatians have gotten the message that extreme nationalism is incompatible with their ambitions of accession to Euro-Atlantic institutions. In stark contrast to election results in Serbia, held about the same time, only a few of Croatia's most extreme nationalists won seats in the new parliament. The jingoist balladeer Marko Perkovic "Thompson" has been ostracized for hate speech which would have been acceptable to many in Croatia less than two years ago. PM Sanader's HDZ courted and won the support of the ethnic Serb party in parliament, which would have been unthinkable under former President Tudjman. Sanader has also made a clear gesture acknowledging culpability of Croatia's WWII-era fascist regime in the Holocaust. It is certain that extreme nationalist sentiment is still a factor in Croatia, but the general recognition that it is nothing to be proud of is a step forward. End Summary.

2. (SBU) When the Tudjman-era HDZ was ejected from power in January 2000, most voters cited corruption and financial mismanagement, not a rejection of extreme nationalism, as their motivation for change. Ironically, the event that served to bring most Croatians to the realization that expressions of extremism were damaging to their interests was a surge of nationalist fervor brought on by the ICTY indictment of retired General Janko Bobetko in the Autumn of 2002.

Croatia Chooses Europe, Not Nationalism

3. (SBU) The Racan government dithered for months about whether it dared to serve the ICTY indictment on the aged, ailing General Bobetko whom the right had dubbed a "hero" of Croatia's war of independence. Throughout the "crisis" -- which PM Racan claimed brought Croatia close to real civil unrest -- the international community maintained a firm line: either cooperate with ICTY or abandon aspirations of integration with NATO and the EU. Bobetko died before he could be transferred to The Hague, but the stalemate dragged on long enough for the wave of emotional response to pass and for most Croatians to decide that they were ready to sacrifice one of their symbols for a future in Europe.

Cleaning out the HDZ

4. (SBU) The HDZ, long the standard-bearer of Croatian nationalism, was during the Bobetko "crisis" completing its own transformation, although some skeptics still believe this transformation is largely superficial. Ivo Sanader first defeated Tudjman henchman Ivic Pasalic in a bruising battle for the party presidency and then began a systematic purge of Pasalic's supporters. Together with Miroslav Tudjman, the son and spitting image of his father, Pasalic founded a new political party to be a home for nationalist HDZ members disaffected by Sanader's more centrist political message.

The "Thompson" Phenomenon

5. (SBU) While Pasalic expected some of his support to come from HDZ hardliners, he also counted on an apparent resurgence of extreme nationalism among younger Croatians for new strength. The popular singer Marko Perkovic -- known as "Thompson" (after the submachine gun) to his fans -- was packing in huge crowds in the Summer and Fall of 2002 to hear jingoist ballads laced with references paying homage to Croatia's WWII-era fascist state, known as the "Ustashe." Tens of thousands of Croatians too young to have served in the "Homeland War" brazenly displayed "Ustashe" symbols and shouted anti-Serb slogans at a series of "Thompson" concerts.

Nationalism Fails at Croatian Polls

16. (SBU) In the Spring of 2003, when political parties began positioning themselves for elections later that year, Sanader strategically staked out the center-right, declaring that, if elected, an HDZ government would be committed to Croatia's integration into Europe, even at the cost of cooperating with ICTY. When elections came around on November 23, voters responded. Poll results show that some of the HDZ nationalists drifted away to the hardline Croatian Party of Right (HSP), but Pasalic's anti-Europe, anti-ICTY message got

nowhere; his party won not a single seat while Sanader's HDZ won nearly half the seats in the new Sabor. The HSP won a total of eight seats, a good result for the HSP as a party, but a sound defeat for extreme nationalism in Croatia. Croatian political columnists were quick to point out how this result contrasted with recent parliamentary elections in Serbia.

Sanader's HDZ In Coalition With Serbs

17. (SBU) Sanader stunned Europeans skeptical of his centrist vocation when he inked a deal with the new parliament's ethnic Serb party, the SDSS. In exchange for their three votes, the SDSS got a pledge to speed the processes of refugee return and restitution of property expropriated from Serbs displaced during the war. While the new government has yet to produce results on the difficult issue of refugee returns, Sanader's effort to reach out to Serbs has made even his most skeptical critics sit up and take notice.

18. (SBU) "Thompson" has fared even worse than Pasalic. A free speech NGO recently posted a transcript from a live version of one of Thompson's ballads. In the plain light of day, Thompson's vile hate speech has turned the stomachs of most Croats. Croatia's PEN Center has long been a critic of Thompson, but on January 24, even the Croatian Bishops' Council -- which from time to time still disputes the extent of the Holocaust in Croatia -- sharply criticized his "hate speech and glorification of crimes." President Mesic, who continues to bear the standard for Croats who oppose extremism, condemned Thompson's lyrics as "shameful" and wondered how people who support fascist ideals could still exist in Croatia. The recent arrest of a Zagreb street vendor of paraphernalia bearing "Ustashe" symbols shows how much things have changed.

Sanader Gesture at Holocaust Commemoration

19. (SBU) In preparation for Croatia's January 27 commemoration of Holocaust Remembrance Day, Sanader made an appearance and an appropriate statement -- together with President Mesic -- at an exhibit of photographs which paid homage to victims of the Holocaust. While this was a continuation of former PM Racan's recognition of Croatian culpability in the Holocaust, it marked another departure from the practice of Tudjman's HDZ.

110. (SBU) Extreme nationalism is still present in Croatia, but its blatant expression is no longer acceptable in public. All of Croatia's responsible political leaders recognize that extreme nationalism is incompatible with Croatia's bid for NATO and EU membership. It seems to us that Croatia's voters -- whether they voted for the HDZ or its political opponents -- made a conscious choice to move forward, even if it means sacrificing some of its nationalist icons -- such as ICTY indictee Ante Gotovina.

FRANK

NNNN